

Old Masonic Temple  
Smithfield  
Virginia

HABS No. VA-424

HABS  
VA

47-604F,

6-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORIC AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
District of Virginia

Historic American Buildings Survey

Prepared at Washington Office

ADDENDUM TO:  
MASON'S HALL  
Mason Street  
Smithfield  
Isle of Wight County  
Virginia

HABS VA-424  
VA,47-SMIF,6-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
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## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### Addendum to MASON'S HALL

HABS No. VA-424

Location: Mason Street, Smithfield, Isle of Wight County, Virginia. The building was demolished in 1953.

Description: As depicted in the ca. 1940 HABS photograph, Mason's Hall was a two-story building, four bays in length and covered by a gable roof. The first floor was constructed out of brick masonry, while the second was wood frame. Four windows punctuated the upper story; below a door opened into each room. A sash window illuminated each first-floor room as well. Chimneys set just inside the gable end walls heated the interior spaces.

History: The "old Masonic temple" was damaged in a storm in the 1910s and demolished in 1953. The lodge replaced it with another structure built for their needs since Mason's Hall was initially erected as a schoolhouse for poor children of the county in the 1750s. With the advent of the American Revolution and the want of a teacher, it fell vacant. The school trustees let the masons assume control over the premises in 1788. The history of building, however, begins with its benefactress, Elizabeth Bray Allen.

Elizabeth, who was the daughter of James Bray, married Arthur Allen III of Surry County in 1711.<sup>1</sup> Invited to their wedding was William Byrd II of Westover.<sup>2</sup> As a bride, she moved into the Allens' brick house, a dwelling erected in 1665.<sup>3</sup> Her husband grew up there along with his seven siblings. Although not the eldest, Arthur inherited the house after the death of his father in 1710 and of his brother James in 1711.<sup>4</sup> The wedding occurred shortly after Arthur's oldest brother John entered the final accounting of their father's estate in court.

Elizabeth Allen died in 1774.<sup>5</sup> The big brick house, and the entailed lands, where she had lived for so many years passed to her grandson Allen Cocke.<sup>6</sup> Within a generation the building was known as "Bacon's Castle."<sup>7</sup> Yet the house played only a minor role in the 1676 uprising against Governor Sir William Berkeley. After the burning of Jamestown, Nathaniel Bacon sent men to establish a stronghold in Surry. They took over Major Allen's house, and unceremoniously turned the family out, including his mother who was described as an "ancient gentlewoman" at the time.<sup>8</sup> At Bacon's death, the rebels disbanded and the Allen family returned.

In 1725 Elizabeth Allen and her brother Thomas Bray renegotiated facets of their inheritance. Allen held onto rights to a plantation on the Chickahominy River and sold her life rights to another for 500 pounds. The siblings entered onto a bond for twice that amount to formalize their arrangement.<sup>9</sup> Within two years Arthur Allen died, without a will, leaving Elizabeth widowed with two children, James and Catherine.

As administrator to Allen's estate, Elizabeth distinguished the money from her brother from that of her husband. She also sought to protect that income with a prenuptial agreement before marrying again.<sup>10</sup> She did remarry, by 1730, to Arthur Smith IV of Isle of Wight County.<sup>11</sup> Arthur Smith and Elizabeth Allen maintained their residence at the Castle. In 1750 Arthur Smith had a plat drawn up for a town – Smithfield – to be established on his property; by 1752 he and Elizabeth were selling lots. The school she financed through a trust agreement was to occupy lot 26 and the building was to be “tenable” by the end of June of 1756.

Free schools, like that endowed by Elizabeth Allen in the 1753 trust, appeared early in Virginia. In Robert Beverly's assessment of the Colony in 1705, he noted the schools were to benefit poor children and were funded by the “legacies of well-inclined gentlemen.”<sup>12</sup> Around fifteen were established in the colonial period, the earliest in 1635.<sup>13</sup> The Mathew Whaley School was operating in Williamsburg by the first decade of the eighteenth century; Allen would have been aware of it, just as she was of the scholarship to the College of William and Mary financed by her aunt in 1716<sup>14</sup> and the “Allen School” her son James wanted his estate to sustain if his sister had no children.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, Arthur Smith II referenced a free school – also a beneficiary of last resort - in his will.<sup>16</sup> There were four such free schools operating in Isle of Wight County's Newport Parish in 1724, although Elizabeth Allen's school established a generation later is perhaps better known.<sup>17</sup> The first schoolmaster is said to have been the Reverend John Reid, who was the minister for Newport Parish.<sup>18</sup>

In her will Allen tried to ensure its longevity with an endowment that was intended to provide for six more children. Slaves named Grace, Israel, Isham, and Jimmy were to be sold to raise the necessary funds.<sup>19</sup> Allen also had been very specific in the deed of trust about what she wanted taught in the school and to whom, and about what she wanted architecturally. She relied on relatives and friends to implement her wishes, as she was unable legally to do it herself. As trustees, they duly administered the school, but erected a brick building rather than what she requested. Allen wanted a well-framed, wood house measuring 28' x 16'. It was to have a schoolroom and another for lodging, to be heated by brick chimneys located at each end, and to be finished inside with plastered walls. Like the chimneystacks, the underpinnings were to be masonry.<sup>20</sup> Her specifications demonstrate an awareness of architectural forms and accepted conventions for articulating interior space. The public record suggests her then husband, Arthur Smith IV, approved of the trust, donated the land, and then left Allen's project to her trustees.

Allen's school remained open until the American Revolution, and in 1788 the surviving trustee, Richard Kello, allowed the masons to take over the building. The lodge added a second-story to the building and occupied it into the twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Allen III was the son of Katherine Baker and Arthur Allen II (also known as Major Allen). He was one of four boys.

<sup>2</sup> *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover*, edited by Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1941). Byrd did not attend the November 27<sup>th</sup> wedding as it was too cold, staying instead at Commissary Blair's by the fire.

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<sup>3</sup> Dendrochronology dated.

<sup>4</sup> Surry County Court Records, Deeds Wills &c., Book 6 1709-1715.

<sup>5</sup> [Obituary], *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon) 24 February 1774, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Will, 20 November 1780 (recorded 1782), Surry County Court Records, Deeds, Wills &c., Book 11 1778-1783.

<sup>7</sup> Not to be outdone, the house built by 1785 for the Smith family in Isle of Wight County came to be called "Windsor Castle." Windsor Castle was a one-and-a-half story, gable roofed house with a central passage, a commonly found house type in the eighteenth century Chesapeake. It is, perhaps, interesting that the children of Arthur Smith's heir (his nephew Thomas) styled their dwelling a castle at the same time Allen's house became Bacon's Castle.

<sup>8</sup> Manuscript 1554, ca. 1704-05, Nicholson Papers, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

<sup>9</sup> 21 August 1728, Surry County Court Records, Deeds Wills &c., Book 7 1715-1730. Thomas Bray, Elizabeth's brother lived at Littleton, next to Kingsmill. He died in 1751. Elizabeth and Arthur Allen had received 200 of the 500 pounds owed before he died; Elizabeth claimed the remainder separate from Arthur Allen's estate and noted it in the martial contract with Smith. It is unclear if she received the remaining money before her brother's death. If his death in 1751 prompted the final payment, that would explain the financing of the school in 1753 apart from Smith.

<sup>10</sup> [Prenuptial Agreement] Indenture, 17 February 1728/29, filed 16 May 1749, Surry County Court Records, Deed Book 5 1746-1749; Surry County Court Records, Orders, 1744-1749.

<sup>11</sup> They are married by September of 1730 when William Bridger writes his will, entrusting his younger son James to them, with Arthur as his guardian, and leaving Elizabeth a dozen china cups. Bridger was her brother-in-law – at least while she was married to Arthur Allen. Isle of Wight County Court Records, Will Book 3 1726-1734, 230, 232-36.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Beverley, *History and Present State of Virginia* (1705), cited in "Education in Colonial Virginia: Part III: Free Schools," *William and Mary Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (October 1897): 71.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Syms endowed the first school in 1635; he lived in Elizabeth City County. In 1659 Thomas Eaton provided for another school in that county. After the American Revolution the schools merged and their successor is the present-day Hampton Academy.

<sup>14</sup> "Bray Family," *William and Mary Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (April 1905), 266.

<sup>15</sup> Surry County Court Records, Deeds Wills &c., Book 9 1738-1754. Allen's will left the bulk of his estate to his sister Catherine and her heirs; if "forward of such issue" to her husband Benjamin for his lifetime and then to the Southwark church wardens to administer "Allen's School" for poor children in the parish.

<sup>16</sup> Isle of Wight County Court Records, Deeds & Wills 2, 377; *Adventurers of Purse and Person, Virginia, 1607-1624/5* 4<sup>th</sup> edition (2007), III: 182-83.

<sup>17</sup> Del Moore to Virginia B. Price, electronic communication, 2008; "Free Schools in Isle of Wight County," *William and Mary Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (October 1896): 112-13; "Education in Colonial Virginia," 71-85; Segar Cofer Dashiell, *Smithfield: A Pictorial History* (Norfolk: Donning Company Publishers, 1977), 66-69.

<sup>18</sup> Dashiell, 66-69.

<sup>19</sup> Will, no date [filed 26 April 1774], Surry County Court Records, Deeds Wills &c., Book 10a 1768-1779.

<sup>20</sup> Indenture, 6 January 1753, Isle of Wight County Court Records, Deed Book 9 1752-1758.